

Close Reading, Close Playing: Video Games, Pedagogy, and the Humanities Classroom

Ping Summer Institute for Teachers

June 5-7, 2019 | Ohio University

Edmond Y. Chang, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Ohio University

change@ohio.edu

<http://www.edmondchang.com/>

@edmondchang

Teaching with video games offers unique pedagogical opportunities and medium-specific challenges, which require particular attention to reading and playing “literacies,” to careful ludic and analytical framing, and to access. On the one hand, video games are not the promised land inhabited by digital “natives.” On the other hand, they are a worthwhile, playable, popular medium and art. In other words, video games cannot be a gimmick or dangling digital carrot, but rather video games must be the artifacts and occasions for study, investigation, discussion, and interrogation. To assume that students, even students born in the twenty-first century, are ready to read and think and write critically about digital media naturalizes these technologies in problematic ways. It gives students the false impression that they have nothing to learn about their own relationship to the technology they have, use, buy, abuse, play, or ignore. Familiarity is not the same as facility; acceptance is not the same thing as acumen.

Therefore, when teaching video games and teaching *with* video games, when students are using video games as the occasion for inquiry, writing, and “reading,” the first step is always about framing: Why are we doing this? What are we doing? Why is this similar and different than other practices? How are we going to get there? Dropping a game into a literature class or a writing course (or any class for that matter) is not as easy as plug and play. It is not enough to assume that students are ready and willing to think about or work with video games. Therefore, over the course of this three-day Institute, we will develop a medium-specific pedagogy, a philosophy of teaching with games, and explore the practices of close playing, paired play, play logs or “plogs,” and gaming as/for writing. We will specifically consider the challenges of using any new medium or technology in the classroom to think about developing different kinds of “literacy” and careful integration of games and gaming. We will engage literature, scholarship, and popular accounts of video games, particularly looking at recent concerns over race, gender, sexuality, ability, and violence. And, finally, of course, we will play games.

Agenda:

- Wednesday, June 5
 - Morning Session
 - Coffee & Introductions
 - Brainstorm & Expectations
 - *Digital Nation* (2010)
 - Discussion
 - Afternoon Session
 - What is Close Playing?
 - Workshop *ImmorTall* (2010)
 - Play Logs
 - Discussion
- Thursday, June 6
 - Morning Session
 - Coffee & Debrief
 - *Second Skin* (2009)
 - Discussion
 - Afternoon Session
 - 5-Minute Game Lesson Plan Workshop
 - Presentations
 - Discussion
- Friday, June 7
 - Morning Session
 - Coffee & Debrief
 - Best Practices
 - Sample Games
 - Q&A

Teaching (with) Games Philosophy:

Teaching with video games offers unique pedagogical opportunities and medium-specific challenges, which require particular attention to reading and playing “literacies,” to careful ludic and analytical framing, and to access. On the one hand, video games are not the promised land inhabited by digital “natives.” On the other hand, they are a worthwhile, playable, popular medium and art. In other words, video games cannot be a gimmick or dangling digital carrot, but rather video games must be the artifacts and occasions for study, investigation, discussion, and interrogation. To assume that students, even students born in the 21st Century, are ready to read and think and write critically about digital media naturalizes these technologies in problematic ways. It gives students the false impression that they have nothing to learn about their own relationship to the technology they have, use, buy, abuse, play, or ignore. Familiarity is not the same as facility; acceptance is not the same thing as acumen.

Close Playing:

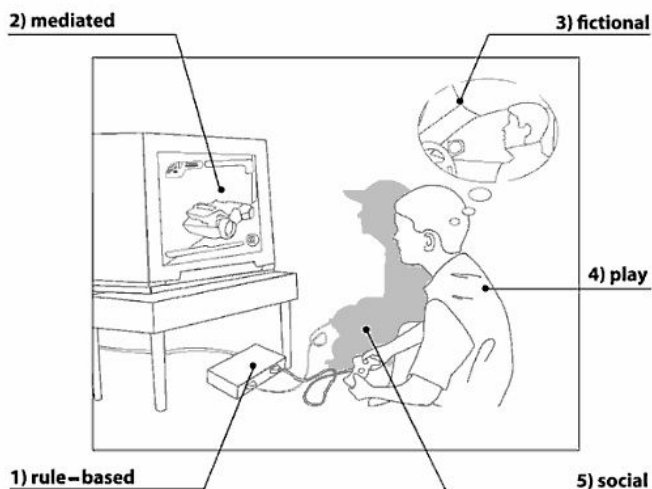
Close playing, like close reading, requires careful and critical attention to how the game is played (or not played), to what kind of game it is, to what the game looks like or sounds like, to what the game world is like, to what choices are offered (or not offered) to the player, to what the goals of the game are, to how the game interacts with and addresses the player, to how the game fits into the real world, and so on. Our students were required to keep close playing play logs or “plogs,” recording what they see, hear, do, and think about as they play and paying attention to narrative, mise en scene, mechanics, and social/cultural contexts.

Paired Playing:

Beyond solo play, our students practiced the close playing technique of paired (or group) play. One person plays while the other (or others) observe, respond with, and write down their observations and reactions. Paired playing, much like peer review for writing, allows you to get a different set of eyes and ears as you go through the close playing process. The burden of trying to pay attention to noticing and noting things while playing is lifted from the player and given to the critical observer. Players play through a section of the game and then switch places: the player becomes the peer observer and the observer becomes the player. Paired playing allows for conversation, discussion, cooperation, and collaboration in both navigating and analyzing the game.

Playing Contexts:

“The Five Analytical Planes” from Michael Nitsche’s *Video Game Space*.



Teaching (with) Video Games Successes & Advantages:

- Fun: engages students in their area of knowledge, something they have experience & skill in
- Engages multiple learning styles
- Playing awake: activity and interactivity
- Play across disciplines, including literature, cultural studies, education, sociology, computer science, art, and politics
- Teaches close reading, close playing
- Teaches distant reading, distant playing
- Cutting edge, creative possibilities

Teaching (with) Video Games Challenges & Limitations:

- Critical Frames: Managing Student Expectations
 - “It’s just a game!” or games not “serious/academic”
 - Playing asleep: playing only for fun, entertainment, distraction, escape
- Student Interest/Skill/Knowledge
 - Not all students play or like video games; varying degrees of experience or skill with games
 - Different types/genres of games appeal to different people
 - It’s not always about winning or losing
 - Proficiency or skill at playing games is different from the ability to critically analyze games
- Selecting Games, Problematic Game Content
- Cost and Access
- Game Studies and Game Pedagogy is New

Tips, Tricks, & Advice:

- Don’t Defend: Provide Frames, Lenses, Key Concepts
- If You Take Games Seriously, They Will Take It Seriously
- Remediation: Draw Nuanced Connection and Analogy to Other Familiar Media (Novels, Films, Music)
- Stick Close to the Text, Close Read & Close Play
- Focus on Play Not Narrative or Progress
- Demonstrate, Use Save Points, Use Walkthroughs and Game Play Videos (YouTube)
- Simple Games for Complex Ideas
- Use Free, Shareware, and Trial Games
- Encourage Shared or Group Play, Set Up a Play Station in a Computer Lab or During Office Hours

Suggested Reading:

Teaching (with) Games

- Chang, Edmond Y. "Critical Approaches to Virtual Worlds, Video Games, and *Ready Player One*." ENG 3850 Course Website. Autumn 2018.
<http://edmondchang.com/courses/3850>
- Chang, Edmond Y. "Cards Against Humanity is _____." *First Person Scholar*. March 17, 2015.
<http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/cards-against-humanity-is/>
- Chang, Edmond Y. "Gaming as Writing, Or, World of Warcraft as World of Wordcraft." *Computers and Composition Online*.
http://www.bgsu.edu/cconline/gaming_issue_2008/ed_welcome_gaming_2008.htm
- Gee, James Paul. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*.
- Holmevik, Jan and Cynthia Haynes, Eds. "2010: Gaming Across the Curriculum." *Currents in Electronic Literacy*.
<https://currents.dwrl.utexas.edu/2010.html>
- Squire, Kurt. *Video Games and Learning: Teaching and Participatory Culture in the Digital Age*.
- Sung, Ki. "Taking the First Steps Towards Teaching With Video Games." *Mind/Shift*. KQED News.
<https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/41396/taking-the-first-steps-towards-teaching-with-video-games>

Video Game Studies (More Generally)

- Anthropy, Anna. *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*.
- Bogost, Ian. *How to Do Things with Videogames*.
- Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games*.
- Castronova, Edward. *Synthetic Worlds*.
- Castronova, Edward. *Exodus to the Virtual Worlds*.
- Chen, Mark. *Leet Noobs: The Life and Death of an Expert Player Group in World of Warcraft*.
- Dyer-Witheford, Nick, and Greig De Peuter. *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*.
- Galloway, Alexander. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*.
- McGonigal, Jane. *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*.
- Salen, Katie and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play*.
- Steinkuehler, Constance. "The Mangle of Play." *Games and Culture*. 1.3 (Jul. 2006): 199-213.
- Wark, McKenzie. *Gamer Theory*.

Video Games & Race

- Gray, Kishonna L. and David J. Leonard, Eds. *Woke Gaming*.
- Higgin, Tanner. "Blackless Fantasy: The Disappearance of Race in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games." *Games and Culture*. 4.1 (Jan. 2009): 3-26.
- Leonard, David J. "Not a Hater, Just Keepin' It Real: The Importance of Race-and Gender-Based Game Studies." *Games and Culture*. 1.1 (2006): 83-88.
- Nakamura, Lisa. *Cybertypes & Digitizing Race*.
- Nakamura, Lisa. "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in World of Warcraft." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 26.2 (June 2009): 128-144.
- Sisler, Vit. "Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. 11.2 (2008): 203-219.

Video Games & Gender/Sexuality

- Chang, Edmond Y. "A Game Chooses, A Player Obeys: *BioShock*, Posthumanism, and the Limits of Queerness." *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*.
- Chang, Edmond Y. "Love is in the Air: Queer (Im)possibility and Straightwashing in *FrontierVille* and *World of Warcraft*." *QED: A Journal of GLBTQ Worldmaking*. Eds. Charles E. Morris III and Thomas K. Nakayama. 2.2 (June 2015) 6-31.
- Chang, Edmond Y. "Queergaming." *Queer Game Studies*.
- Condis, Megan. *Ready Player Two*.
- Kopas, Merritt. *Video Games for Humans*.
- Morris, Charles and Thomas Nakayama, Eds. *QED: A Journal of GLBTQ Worldmaking*. 2.2 (2015). Special essay on queer games:
<http://msupress.org/journals/issue/?id=50-21D-5EF>
- Nardi, Bonnie A. *My Life as a Night Elf Priest*.
- Ruberg, Bonnie & Adrienne Shaw, Eds. *Queer Game Studies*.
- Ruberg, Bonnie, Ed. *Queerness and Games Conference at First Person Scholar*. A number of essays:
<http://ourglasslake.com/2015/03/queerness-and-games-at-first-person-scholar/>
- Ruberg, Bonnie. "No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games that Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*. 2.2 (Summer 2015): 108-124.
- Sarkeesian, Anita. *Feminist Frequency*.
<https://feministfrequency.com/>
- Shaw, Adrienne. *Gaming at the Edge*.
- Sundén, Jenny and Malin Sveningsson. *Gender and Sexuality in Online Game Cultures: Passionate Play*.
- Stabile, Carol. "'I Will Own You': Accountability in Massively Multiplayer Online Games." *Television and New Media*. 15.1 (2014): 43-57.
- Wysocki, Matthew and Evan W. Lauteria, Eds. *Rated M for Mature*.

Digital Games Backlash & Online Harrassment

- Collins, Sean T. "Anita Sarkeesian on GamerGate: 'We Have a Problem and We're Going to Fix This.'" 17 Oct. 2014. 5 Jan. 2016.
<http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/anita-a-sarkeesian-gamergate-interview-20141017>.
- Dewey, Caitlin. "The Only Guide to Gamergate You Will Ever Need to Read." *The Washington Post*. 14 Oct. 2014. 5 Jan. 2016.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/10/14/the-only-guide-to-gamergate-you-will-ever-need-to-read/>.
- Evans, Sarah Beth and Elyse Janish. "#INeedDiverseGames: How the Queer Backlash to GamerGate Enables Nonbinary Coalition." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*. 2.2 (Summer 2015): 125-150.
- Phillips, Whitney. "A Brief History of Trolls." *The Daily Dot*.
<http://www.dailydot.com/opinion/phillips-brief-history-of-trolls/>
- Phillips, Whitney. "Don't Feed the Trolls? It's Not That Simple." *The Daily Dot*.
<http://www.dailydot.com/opinion/phillips-brief-history-of-trolls/>